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Radical Unionism in the Midwest, 1900–1950

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phy, one that adds to the study of what historians are now calling vernacular photography. Take care of those shoeboxes of snapshots.

Radical Unionism in the Midwest, 1900–1950, by Rosemary Feurer. The Working Class in American History Series. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006. xix, 320 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$65.00 cloth, \$25.00 paper.

Reviewer David M. Anderson is assistant professor of history at Louisiana Tech University. He is the author of the forthcoming *"Things Are Different Down Here": The 1955 Perfect Circle Strike, Conservative Civic Identity, and the Roots of the New Right in the 1950s Heartland*.

At a time when analyses of our political culture are reduced to a facile and absolute "red state-blue state" divide, it is easy to forget that the Midwest once featured a profound ideological struggle, as conservative employers squared off against radical "left-led" unions for control of the region's political economy. As Rosemary Feurer shows in this deftly executed study, no segment of the heartland's labor movement was more radical than the St. Louis-based District 8 of the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America (UE), which was led by William Sentner, openly a member of the Communist Party (CP). Beginning in the mid-1930s, Sentner and his left-wing allies advanced a notion of "civic unionism" that inspired militant rank-and-file workers in the region's electrical products industries to contest their employers for shop floor and civic supremacy. The UE was never able to consolidate its power as did those CIO industrial unions in the automobile and steel sectors, but up through the 1940s District 8 held its own against some of the nation's most intransigent anti-union firms, reaching a peak of 50,000 members during World War II. At the same time, Sentner also reached the height of his influence, putting together a broad coalition of farmers, employers, workers, and conservationists in support of the proposed Missouri Valley Authority (MVA), which he envisioned serving as an effective regional planning board in the postwar years.

Sentner's grand plans for the UE and the MVA never materialized. As Feurer shows, the onset of the Cold War spelled the end of District 8's left-wing leadership and decimated the UE. After the passage of the Taft-Hartley Act in 1947 made Communists a liability for the labor movement, the CIO's liberal leaders expelled its 11 "left-led" unions. Besieged by right-wing anti-union forces, Sentner was convicted under the Smith Act, quit the CP, and died, penniless, in 1958. The UE fared no better, as much of its membership was picked off by the International Union of Electrical Workers (IUE), which the CIO established as

an anticommunist alternative to the UE. The winner in this internecine labor war, as Feurer notes, was the region's employers, who forced the IUE's more passive leaders to accept repeated concessions until the last electrical products plant vacated St. Louis in the early 1990s.

Feurer advances two major propositions that, together, argue convincingly for the centrality of the Midwest in the battle over industrial unionism. First, she shows that any study of the political economy must include "independent" firms on the periphery of American industry whose profits depend on control over regional wage markets. The Midwest contained numerous smaller firms, led by St. Louis's "big three" — Emerson, Wagner, and Century — along with such heartland firms as the Maytag Corporation, based in Newton, Iowa. As Feurer notes, these firms maintained their competitive position with electrical products giants General Electric and Westinghouse, not through increased productivity, but through strict shop floor discipline and by imposing a "community wage" well below those paid in other industrial labor markets. Central to the independents' power was their ability to unite in employer associations to extinguish the threat of craft unionism, which it accomplished by the 1920s and maintained until the Great Depression, when bad times drove wages down to a level where even their low-paid workers rebelled, opening the door for Sentner and other CP members to harness their socialist vision to the Midwest's incipient labor movement.

Feurer's second case for the Midwest's centrality in the 1930s labor insurgency highlights the importance of homegrown left-wingers such as Sentner. Here, Feurer rejects the two main schools of thought about the CP members' role in the rise of the CIO. She finds that Sentner and his allies were neither mere trade unionists indistinguishable from non-Communists nor were they slaves to a "foreign" ideology and the CP's shifting party line. Indeed, many Communists had ties to a democratic socialist tradition that had flourished among midwestern miners, craft unionists, and railroad workers in the early twentieth century. Sentner, for example, grew up in St. Louis and adopted a socialist outlook after a stint in the merchant marines. He and other left-wingers constituted what Feurer terms a "militant minority," a vanguard of activists who championed racial justice and gender equity in opposition to employers who used African Americans and women as a source of low-wage labor, and also counter to the racist and sexist sentiments of many District 8 members. Yet, because Sentner showed how "pragmatic" demands for better wages posed a significant challenge to employers' civic power, he enjoyed broad support among the UE membership throughout the heartland, including most of the workers at Newton's Maytag plant,

who engaged in a bitter battle with management that included a lengthy sit-down strike in the summer of 1938. Sentner's championing of rank-and-file participation helped make District 8 into what Feurer considers "the most democratic labor organization in the country" (xvii).

At times, Feurer overstates her case; one did not have to be a Communist to embrace civic unionism, and District 8 had no monopoly on the slogan, "human rights over property rights," which also served as a rallying cry for midwestern UAW members. But, to her credit, Feurer reminds us that any study of industrial unionism must take seriously the contributions of radical labor activists. Although they would stand no chance of surviving in today's narrow political spectrum, Feurer concludes that they would be welcome allies in helping local communities confront the challenges of today's global economy. A latter-day Sentner might start in Newton, Iowa, where in October 2007 the Maytag plant closed its doors after 114 years in production.

Fighting Son: A Biography of Philip F. La Follette, by Jonathan Kasperek. Madison: Wisconsin State Historical Society Press, 2006. xviii, 332 pp. Photographs, maps, notes, bibliography, index. \$22.95 paper.

Reviewer John D. Bunker is professor emeritus of history at the University of Wisconsin-Parkside. He is the author or editor of seven books and some three dozen articles and essays on the Progressive Era, including *The History of Wisconsin*, volume 4, *The Progressive Era, 1893-1914*.

Fighting Son is a heroic attempt to delineate a political and personal perspective on one of the most enigmatic figures in the history of midwestern politics. Although the author generally succeeds in his task, he cannot avoid admitting that some aspects of Wisconsin's Philip Fox La Follette will always remain paradoxical, puzzling, and internally contradictory. A self-described "radical," chief architect of the Wisconsin Progressive Party, and the son of a progressive icon, he later took up with such reactionaries as Charles A. Lindbergh and Douglas MacArthur. Blessed with gifts that made a career in politics "almost inevitable," he also harbored a desire for the cloister of academia. An avid spokesman for the America First Committee, he later served as MacArthur's right-hand man during World War II. As one who espoused the "most significant expression of liberal thought outside the New Deal" (xvii) and fiercely defended state and party autonomy, La Follette nevertheless recognized that the enormity of the country's economic malaise mandated massive federal intervention.

The keys to understanding Phil La Follette, according to Kasperek, are "his profound grasp of the meaning of America" (259) and his "de-